ED 026 410 TE 500 283

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 026 410 TE 500 283

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The New Breed--A New Direction.

Pub Date 68

Note-11p.; Paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Regional Conference on the Junior College, Colorado Springs, Oct 12, 1968.

EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.65

Descriptors-College Freshmen, *Composition (Literary), Composition Skills (Literary), *English, *English Instruction, *Higher Education, Multimedia Instruction, *Teaching Methods

A "new breed" of college English teachers and the texts they advocate as well as their multi-media methods of instruction are discussed. According to the author, the "new breed" object to order of any kind and their teaching methods lack moderation and purpose. In conclusion, he emphasizes that the purpose of freshman English is to teach students how to write; books, films, "gimmicks," and discussions are relevant only when they contribute to the central idea of the course. (BN)

ED 026 410 TE 500 283

ED026410

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THE NEW BREED -- A NEW DIRECTION?

~~Don Tighe~~ Donald J. Tighe
St. Petersburg Junior College
1968

Last week everyone in junior college English teaching all over the world received three new texts, all with the same drift, all aimed to liven up the corpse of freshman English--on all tracks--by giving it an injection of what is called "stimulating ideas." These are the three culprits:

Bens, John H. Some Shapers of Modern Man. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968.

Michel, Lois A. Way Out. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968

Morgan, Fred. Here and Now. Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1968.

All three bear striking similarities to an earlier book (I assume a successful one) by John H. Bens --A Search for Awareness. All three are books for what one of my colleagues calls "Swingers." (He considers himself one, so the label is not supposed to be pejorative.) All three contain essays; all three contain poetry; all three contain short stories; all three exploit the newsworthy, not to say the sensational.

Though these recent publications take a direction I'm not sure is right for freshman English, I am only remotely concerned with books. What is more important is the support these books have received from some of my colleagues, not a majority of them, but a sufficient number to concern me. They seem to make up a new breed of college English teacher (perhaps indigineous to the two-year college only), a breed sired by discontent with the number of deficient writers pouring through open doors and nursed by the belief that McLuhan and his disciples have sounded the death knell of the written word. I suspect with due respect for them, for they are imaginative and somewhat"dedicated"

(whatever that means)--that they are faddists, faddists who seem willing to turn the freshman writing program in for a mess of pottage. Most admit that it seems to be the duty of the two-year college English department to teach the transfer student "correct" English (correct meaning standard), but that the vast majority of students need learn only "effective" English (effective meaning, I believe, . . . but I'm not really sure). In short, I suspect them because I cannot see that they have a goal, aside from a vague discontent with what is being done.

For six months now the Florida state universities and junior colleges have been engaged in a study of two-year college English. This task force's primary consideration has been, as you might expect, articulation between two-year colleges and the state universities. One of the demands they make of the two-year college is that the student planning to transfer to the state universities be taught to write--to have a central idea, to analyze the topic, to select and present sufficient relevant evidence to support the ideas, to construct sentences and paragraphs that are developed and coherent, and to adhere to the conventions of grammar, usage, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. The transfer student is being served by the standard freshman compositon course now offered in the two-year college. As I understand it, however, Florida universities find that some junior colleges do better jobs than others.

Granted, a great number of the two-year college students do not transfer; they are "terminal" students (whatever they are). But it seems to me that these persons too need to know something about writing. To beat the drum for the personal

satisfaction one gets from being able to write a waste of time here. But all bosses want their secretaries to know how to write--at least to write letters. Job applicants need to be able to write letters of application. Members of a democracy ought to be stirred up enough to want, periodically, to write to the editor of the local paper or at least to Ann Landers. I cannot think of a student--transfer or terminal--who can't benefit immensely by being taught to write. If he never writes again after he finishes junior college, he'll need to write to complete some of his course work in the two-year college. Some courses still require papers; most include some kind of essay examination. A college student needs to learn to write, and it is the job of the English department to teach him as best it can.

Some of the new ideas and gimmicks used by a growing number of English instructors may improve the teaching of writing-- if the new ideas and gimmicks are seen as means, not ends. But I'm afraid, from what I've seen, that too many are willing to sacrifice what must be done for the colorful--the new format in a textbook, the good of the audio-visual aid, the desire for the freedom of the unstructured.

Let me use two examples to illustrate what I mean by this new breed's approach. At a meeting I attended several weeks ago, a two-year college English instructor made the following comment: "This class I'm teachin in 101 (second semester composition) has me stumped. They are more structured than I am. As a result, they don't give me any feedback. They don't seem to understand what I'm trying to do. I'm unstructured. They seem to think I'm not organized. But I don't believe in structuring my approach, and so far they just haven't responded. No feedback!"

Now it seems to me that an instructor who really wants feedback gets feedback. The students' eyes show it. When I have a clear idea of where I'm going, the students soon know it and give me plenty of feedback. When I am confused, they turn me off. That's feedback. I was disturbed at his conclusion that he wasn't getting any response. He seemed to me to be getting more feedback than he could stand. Unfortunately it was all bad news. He didn't want to believe it.

At the same meeting another instructor said something like this: "If our first semester composition course is worth anything, why do the students write so poorly at the beginning of 101? They write as poorly as they did at the beginning of the first semester. The course is certainly not doing what it is supposed to do; that is, it isn't preparing students to write." (It is worth noting that this instructor also advocates the unstructured approach. He prides himself on his off-the-cuff delivery. He calls it "not working from a script.")

His assumption is faulty. I told him that I did not have the same problem. The students I teach in 100 have little trouble writing for me in 101. Now they do not write magnificent essays, but they can write essays that communicate--have a recognizable thesis, relatively adequate development, a fair degree of logical relationship, relatively adequate topic sentences for developmental paragraphs, competent transition, and fairly conventional mechanical qualities--spelling, capitalization, punctuation. Some are even interesting to read. The students who have the real problems are the ones who come from the kind of instructor who asked the question. They <u>do</u> have trouble writing.

The two examples do not prove my point. But they do seem to suggest that more thought might be given before the new is allowed to replace the old. It has not yet been proven to me that the freshman English program should not attempt to improve the students' ability to think straight and express his thoughts in patterns that other people can understand, especially in written patterns. Though I admit that there are a few students who do not do their best work under too much structure, it is my experience that most students benefit by following a pattern. The exceptionally able student who resents structure I can handle individually. The student with an inadequate background seems to me to benefit most from rather rigid structure.

The new breed takes various forms. They employ numerous techniques--some new, some old--most of which are sound when used in moderation. Unfortuantely, moderation is too often not their forte. One I know uses what he calls "the library approach." This technique is based on the premise that the student is wasting time in the classroom listening to "those old lectures." If he goes to the library, this instructor reasons, he can proceed at his own pace on some project of his choosing. So two out of three meetings a week both instructor and classes go to the library to work on their individual projects. In the library, the instructor moves from student to student watching each read books, articles, newspapers, to complete a set of exercises or to work on research projects. The library is a fine place--I agree-- but I wonder if it is not the place for the student to go when class is over, to read assigned or suggested materials, or, perhaps, merely to browse. Having substituted in this type of instructor's class recently, I think I got some

feedback that the instructor has not yet received. Following the plan, I took the roll, made the assignment, and then told the students to go to the library to work on their "projects." A small voice from the back of the room: "What, again?" I was reminded of the apocryphal story of the first grader who said to her very progressive permissive teacher: "Miss Jones, let's not do anything we like today."

Team teaching is the rage now. And I am for it--so long as it does not interfere with learning. As I understand team teaching, it is administratively sound (you pack 300 students into one room and give them the same information all at the same time) and it sometimes relieves the instructor of several hours per semester in the classroom. In addition--according to its enthusiasts--it puts an expert in the classroom for every large class lecture. The man who knows literature can lecture on literature; the man who knows grammar can expound on grammar; the man who knows punctuation can go over the rules for commas; and so it goes, each specialist dealing with his specialty. When the large sessions break into the smaller sessions--discussion groups--the class is, theoretically, open for application of theory or further elucidation. At these meetings, however, the grammarian grammars, the punctuation expert punctuates, the literary man literaries. Team teaching is, perhaps, great--in small doses--but frankly I don't want my students to have to listen to the two "Swingers" described above; they can do that in the student union over a coke and cigarette. I feel the "Swinger" is wasting their time and depriving them of my time. Perhaps I'm wrong, but enormous classes and the confusion accompanying them leave something to be desired. For five years I have heard nothing but complaints from students taught in large

sections by teams, television, and tapes. I have never heard a student say he wanted to be taught that way. And I have never asked; the information has been volunteered. I must admit, however, that student essays on such teaching have been stimulating. When students are angry, they write fairly well.

Somewhat closely related to the new textbooks, perhaps inspired by the new books, are the new format enthusiasts. On the day I received a copy of Michel's Way Out, three members of my department rushed to show me their copies. They pointed to "all that white space, the colorful prints, the 'snazzy' titles." But not one had read the book.

Them: Have you seen this book?

Me: Yes

Them: Isn't it good looking?

Me: It certainly is colorful

Them: It sure is snazzy.

Me: Have you read the introductory material?

Them: Not yet.

Me: Have you noticed the slant of the material?

Them: What slant?

Me: Does it suit the course as we've worked it out?

Them: Who cares? It's--yuk, yuk--way out!

Having read the book carefully previously, I was relatively familiar with its contents, particularly with the author's introductory sections, about which I had my opinions.

Now I am not for censorship, though Mom's apple pie and the all-American boy are sometimes more appealing to me than Norman Mailer's diction and the phonyism of Playboy. But before I recommend a text, I try to read it. (With new format books I've learned to look for the dirty parts.) Witness the following

passage from one of the short stories in one of the books with an exciting new format:

> "Shut your mouth, Jewboy," said the leather cap, and he moved the knife back and forth in front of my coat button, "No more black pussy for you."
> "Speak with respect about this lady, please."
> I got slapped on my mouth.
> "That ain't no lady," said the long face in the half-inch brim, "that's black pussy. She deserve to have evvy bit of her hair shave off. How you like to have evvy bit of hair shave off, black pussy?"

Now mind you, I didn't say I'd reject the book because of that passage, but before I'd recommend the book, I'd know that passage was there. At least five members of our staff recommended the book in which that passage appears; not one of the five knew the passage was there. One staff member, who admitted that the introductory material in one of the books he was promoting was rather poor, said, "But what difference does that make; we can ignore the introductions."

Most of the new breed hate order--any kind of order. They object to meeting classes three times a week or four times a week or five times a week. Why, they ask, does the student have to come to class at 9:00 a.m.? Why not at 10:00 or 11:00 or 12:00? And why can't he come at different times on various days? Why does the class have to meet in a designated room? Why not out on the lawn? Or in the student union? Some object to the chairs's being arranged in rows. They insist that the chairs should be in a circle. They object to taking roll, to grading A through F, to filing student themes, to using textbooks, perhaps I am not aware of the underlying motive for their rebellion (they call it underlying philosophy), but I find it hard to be upset by what seem to me to be non-existent problems. I have not found that the order implied by these administrative details in any way detracts from the teaching and learning of

writing.

The new breed are wild about audio-visual aids. They admire tape recorders. The record students' voices, their own voices, their comments on student's papers, selected television and radio programs, records, automobile sounds, people snoring. Some play these tapes class period after class period and then have the students write fifteen minutes worth of impressions they got from the tapes. I can't help but think that the student could listen to the traffic sounds on the way home from classes and write his impressions up fifteen minutes before he goes to bed; then the class time could be put to better use. One of the new breed who substituted for one of my colleagues played a 50-minute tape and then had the students write their impressions for 50 minutes (a two-hour period). The papers were never seen again--by student or regular instructor. When the regular instructor asked about the papers, she was told they had been misplaced, but "The experience was in the listening and writing."

Films are a big thing in the new-look classroom these days. Taking cues from Mass Media, several of my colleagues spend most of the time running films and chatting about them. I admit that now and then a film does stimulate students, but I'm not convinced that films are a substitute for worthwhile classroom activity. It seems to me that films should be supplementary aids, not the substance of the course--unless, of course, one is teaching a course in the film. I am reminded of the middle-aged student who approached me recently to tell me he was pleased I was teaching writing in his class. "I didn't take this class to see movies," he added. He explained that his first session's instructor (at another institution, thank heaven) had shown films at least half the time.

I do not mean to condemn those who use these new devices. But I am concerned with what they are achieving. Whether we use poetry or essays or short stories or films or tapes or sculpture to stimulate ideas for writing, the end result must be writing. Now perhaps writing is passe, but I'm not convinced yet.

I still feel that a student--even a culturally deprived student--is benefited more by being shown how to write an essay than by being urged to memble into a tape recorder or chat about a film or stare at a photo of a painting--unless, of course, he is studying film or painting. If he can compose off-the-cuff, well and good, but if he can't, he is clearly going to have to scratch down some of his ideas, work out the snags on paper. It is obvious to me that Harry Reasoner, David Brinkley, Lyndon Johnson, and Bobby Kennedy use scripts, prepared essays, when they speak on television. It seems logical to me that the English department's job is to teach freshmen how to compose such a script.

I think it is the English department's job to teach the student ways to put things down on paper in an orderly fashion, despite the fact that there are other more fetching items than writing to talk about. It seems to me that the history teacher should teach history. Even if he teaches remedial history, he still teaches history. The person who teaches biology, even low level biology, must teach biology. The artist teaches art. If the student wants to study sculpture, he should take a course in sculpture; if he is to study oil painting he should take a course in oil painting; if he is to study mathematics, he should take math. If he takes a course in freshman

composition, he should study writing; and if the course is in writing essays, then he should be taught to write essays. Anything that does not contribute to that end--writing--should be junked. Only when the books, the gimmicks, the discussions contribute to the central idea of the course are they relevant.

That is not to say that the student can't write about sculpture, painting, math in his English course; but the freshman English instructor's job of teaching involves teaching him how to write--about anything--to compose, to put words together into sentences, sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into divisions, divisions into essays. And he should spell correctly, punctuate accurately, capitalize effectively. The job of freshman composition is to teach students to write.

Let there be no doubt about it, students must be interested in what they are studying. If the instructor must stand on his head to teach students proper methods of writing a thesis statement, by all means let him stand on his head. If he can point up methods for developing a topic sentence by using television, let him use television. If he must show movies to point up logical processes, let him show movies. But it is important that the head-standing, television watching, and movie viewing pay off in what the course is all about. To turn a freshman English program into a film festival may promote the popularity of the "Swinging" instructor--perhaps even the course itself--but unless it pays off in the student's learning to write, he may just as well be paying his tuition to the Bijou.

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